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A STUDY OF SOUTHERN COTTON-MILL COMMUNITIES.

CHILD LABOR. THE OPERATIVES IN GENERAL.

THE strenuous bitterness with which a majority of the cotton manufacturers in Georgia have for several years fought the passage of a statute prohibiting the employment of children under twelve years of age in factories, mines, and similar places of labor in this state is scarcely to be taken as a trustworthy gauge of the sentiment of southern employers at large.

It is true that up to the present time only four southern states have stood in line with the twenty-two representatives of other sections as having legislated in this direction. But it is only fair to bear in mind that the necessity for such enactment did not arise in this section so early by several generations as in the manufacturing East or the mining West. Twenty years ago there were in all the cotton states only 667,000 spindles, which converted but a meager fraction of this region's great staple into yarn. That number has since been multiplied more than ten times, making approximately 7,000,000 spindles now in operation here. The growth of the industry has been so phenomenal that legislation along related lines has failed to keep pace with it.

Yet one who studies closely certain sociological and industrial phases of the situation must feel convinced that, despite the recent defeat of the child-labor bill before the Georgia legislature, child labor itself is destined to prove but a temporary expedient in the southern factories. Not only is the sentiment of the people at large quite as much against it, after less than a score of years' trial, as was the sentiment of the New England states when more than one generation had fairly grown up in their mills, but there are also practical agencies militating against the system and proving very powerful in co-operation with moral and civic considerations.

The Labor Commission of North Carolina has issued an official report, in which it is set forth that, while in 1895 there were 6,046 children employed in the factories of that state, there were in 1899 only 3,308, of which number 1,694 were boys and 1,614 girls. During the four years in which this decrease of 50 per cent. in child labor was taking place there was an increase of 50 per cent. in the number of women and 100 per cent. in the number of men similarly employed, to meet an increase of nearly 40 per cent. in the number of spindles. Were bureaus of labor already established in each of the cotton states, it is reasonably certain that reports of kindred significance would now be issuing from them; for the situation in one of these states is much the situation in all the others.

The restriction of child labor by law is looked to as an early probability in North Carolina, but that has had nothing to do with the remarkable decline shown in the commissioner's figures. Nor are we such Utopians as to attribute the whole of this gratifying result to the strong aversion exhibited by some of the most influential manufactories, as notably the Erwin Mills at Durham and the Caraleigh at Raleigh, to that which is the most cruel form of slavery. Other active causes have been at work; economic considerations are potent factors here as elsewhere.

Manufacturers in this part of the country, as in Massachusetts or Illinois, are learning the lesson that it is a false economy, with expensive practical as well as ethical results, which prompts the employment of the low-priced labor of children. Delicate machinery operated at high speed demands more intelligent and steadfast attention, to secure the best results, than untaught and usually careless childhood can give it. The direct loss thus involved counts heavily in the course of a year, and comes to be weighed comparatively as the adult labor of a section grows more skilful and satisfactory; nor are clear-headed mill men slow to discover that such loss, estimated closely, is by no means compensated for by the low scale of wages to the child operative.

With all these considerations before him, one must arrive at the satisfactory conclusion that child labor in the factories of our

country is a rapidly vanishing evil. From such a conclusion it is not unnatural to desire to pass on to a study of the homes and the family life of the mill operatives throughout the new manufacturing South; and to the student of sociological problems a few weeks or months spent in the factory towns will prove rich in results.

Having visited a score or these interesting communities in different cotton states, I find myself still drawn back to them by haunting suggestions of unexplored phases in the social life, domestic order, industry, education, or moral codes of their people. It is a many-sided matter that we touch when we discuss the homes and the home-living of the world's toilers. Nor will conscience be slow to protest against any hasty judgments concerning a life into which we come only as an exotic element.

I find points of distinct difference between the factory operatives of the South and those of any other section of our own country, or even Europe.

In the first place, there are no urban instincts in these southern mill communities. Whatever virtues they lack, at least they have not the vices of cities. The good and the evil in them are still such as belong to a strictly rural people. But no one must expect after another decade and a half to find the same thing true; for with the passing of the present generation this unique characteristic must of necessity be largely lost. Gregariousness of living is potent to efface such a mark even when deeply stamped.

It may be asked: What are the indications of this quality which, for lack of a better word, is named "rusticity"? The signs are many and easy to read. No observant person can miss the plain evidence even in his first day with the mill people. He walks past the cottages row on row, and sees prince's feather and bachelor's button growing in the tiny yards, patchwork quilts sunning from the windows, and strings of red pepper festooned on the back porch. The boys are quite often chewing tobacco, but they are not smoking cigarettes. Often, alas! the girls dip snuff, but they do not lace in their waists nor attempt handkerchief flirtations. The women are given to quiet, and a

profound reserve usually marks their social intercourse. The festive gatherings in the "amusement halls" on Saturday nights are either stiff parties or genuine country dances. The "barbecue" is common on a general holiday, and the "all-day singing" of a Sunday still remains the acme of enjoyment, affording the perfect blending of sociality and devotion.

One might go on indefinitely with such signs. But since this matter will be encountered again when we arrive at the discussion of education and social life among the operatives, we leave it without attempting to adduce other convincing proofs of their rural proclivities.

A second quality differentiating our people from the northern factory communities of today is what may well be called their unmodified Americanism. Up to the present time there is an entire absence of the foreign element of population among them, and the effect of such absence is very marked. Not only do better manners prevail in this people sprung from our own soil, but better morals, greater social purity, less turbulence and lawlessness. Observance of law is easier, more natural, even to illiterate Americans, than to other nations, because law has typified to them from childhood the majesty of right, not the tyranny of might.

The finer respect for women which marks American manhood extends also to these toilers. Except among their very lowest, motherhood inspires the regard it meets in other social classes; and, while in many of the mills the number of female employees exceeds that of males, yet in few of the better kind are there any mothers of young children at work.

These considerations lead at once to the questions: Where does such a class of labor come from? What are its antecedents?

The first is easily answered: the operatives have poured into the new factories, not from town or city, but from the country, direct from the cotton fields, we may say, to the mills. It was certainly not an anomalous movement when cotton was bringing $4\frac{3}{4}$ cents per pound. But with the staple commanding 9 to 10 cents, some reactionary phases must be looked for and provided against.

The antecedents of this class of labor deserve some attention. A great majority of the operatives come from the agricultural class known as tenant farmers; that is, men who farm the land of others, paying as rent a considerable portion of each year's crop. The tenant system was adopted in the South during the period of disorder and chaotic ruin following the Civil War, when our old system of labor was dissolved and no better base remained on which to build anew the fabric of agricultural life. Unfit as it is for a country of such institutions as ours, and the source in itself of very sore evils, the tenant system still had a necessary part in the closing third of a century.

Many of the tenant farmers of the last generation had, indeed, "seen better days." Not a few had been freeholders before the war, although usually of the little farms interspersed here and there among the great plantations of the aristocrats. Many others had been overseers, factors, agents of various sorts. A small proportion came from the class of decayed gentlemen. The rest were made up from those strata usually lumped together in motley fashion as "crackers," or, in South Carolina, "poor buckra."

Such are the antecedents of the mass of operatives in the new mills of the South. Bearing in mind this derivation, it is not difficult to account for many qualities, traits, and habitudes that might otherwise appear anomalous. For example, their extravagance is a characteristic almost without parallel among the toiling classes. But it is simple of explanation. The transition from a dollarless past to a many-dollared present would render any class of untutored human beings extravagant. Through a long generation of tenant-farming, these people scarcely saw a piece of money from Christmas to Christmas. Each year's supplies were either furnished by the owner of the land or bought on credit at a near-by store, to be paid for when cotton was picked. The harvest came, sometimes good, sometimes bad; but, good or bad, it seemed uniformly to take it all to pay the merchant and the landlord. The tenant rarely enjoyed even the sorry pleasure of selling his cotton and paying the hard cash to these creditors; instead, he usually hauled the raw product of

his toil directly to them and then turned apathetically away to begin half-hearted preparations for another year's crop. His wife and children shared his labors, sharing also his empty-handedness.

This went on through the dragging years of the South's agricultural prostration, until the last decade came, with its mills and its revolution, when the moneyless and landless ones drew into the new communities, to try breadwinning under unfamiliar conditions. The mothers and daughters had often worked on the farms, so they did not hesitate at the factory door, except when very young children claimed the care of the former. In most instances, indeed, the women's fingers proved the readiest for the new occupation.

But neither women nor men acquired dexterity without a period of laborious effort such as all workmen must struggle through when, possessed of only the inherited instincts of generations of bucolic ancestors, they set themselves to some form of mechanical labor. That period being done with, a certain amount of skill began to appear in all fairly intelligent operatives, and shortly they found themselves bringing home each Saturday night, or alternate Saturday night, according as pay-day fell, what appeared to many of them an amazing pile of money.

Cases such as the following are multiplied many times over: The father, mother, and six or eight boys and girls (for large families are the rule in this class), ranging from twelve to twenty-odd years of age, are at work in one mill. The adults, if fair weavers, easily average \$22 each per month; the younger members of the family are probably spinners and average about \$14 each per month. This family, then, that in the old life of the farm thought themselves fortunate, indeed, to handle \$100 in cash throughout a year, now bring home something like \$175 every month. Is it strange that extravagance seizes upon this metamorphosed household? If the sudden transition from penilessness to plethoric pocketbooks did not in itself lead straight to spendthrift living, the precedents of their neighbors would speedily teach the trait. So the housewife loads the table with luxuries hitherto unknown, the pretty girl is tempted into all the

caprices of dress that her little Vanity Fair may flaunt, while the father and brother can scarcely tell whither their dollars speed on such swift wings.

Yet this wastefulness, too, is but a phase, destined to gradual elimination in the evolution of the process by which an agricultural people are converted into a manufacturing class. With all their illiteracy, they are not devoid of understanding; and when a certain bewilderment of these early years is past, it will be borne in upon them in countless ways, by their school privileges, their larger experience, their clearer views of the outside world—by their own innate manhood, indeed—that there are far other uses for hard-earned money than to be lavished on mere food and clothing and shelter. Many of them are already opening their eyes to the fact that for an abundance of things to eat and wear they have bartered a certain independence and manliness which are fostered by agricultural pursuits, even the lowliest, and which breed sturdier virtues than they can now transmit to their children. Awakening perceptions such as these will lead to different results: to a rescinding of extravagance always; often to a return to the farm; but far oftener to a steadfast purpose to work straight on where they are, saving every cent possible to educate the coming generation and set their feet in the path that leads to freedom.

How can they save money? clamor those who have been studying the comparative wage-scale of northern and southern factories without acquaintance with the actual conditions of the latter. By reasonable economy, is the answer here as elsewhere. From \$20 to \$30 per month is paid good weavers throughout this section, while the average spinner draws from \$10 to \$16; and these are regarded as good living wages in a country where the prices of necessities range much lower than in the East or the West. Houses are to be heated only about four months of the year, and fuel is cheap, in many places less than \$1.50 per cord for wood and \$2 to \$4 per ton for coal. Clothing costs far less in this warm climate than in a cold one. Farm and garden supplies are bought for what seems to the northern mind an absurdly low price, and dairy products are never high. Besides,

in all the rural mill communities, which are now counted by the score to every one in a city, a garden patch always, and often pasturage for one cow, can be counted on with every cottage.

House rent is not a considerable item. The mill cottages rent by the month on the basis of 60 cents to \$1 per room, and they range in size from three to eight rooms, four, however, being the rule. With few exceptions these cottages are fairly comfortable and built with a view to good sanitation. Outside of cities, each one has its ground space where the inmates may grow flowers and vegetables, thus fostering a form of local attachment that is by no means weak.

From this brief survey it may be deduced that, while the one-time tiller of the soil has lost something in becoming a factory operative, he has also gained something. A surer balance between gain and loss may be struck when we have looked well into the subject of education in the new mill communities.

LEONORA BECK ELLIS.

ATLANTA, GA.